

Press Council without Chairperson, incomplete 15th council, etc



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Is it possible to have a quasi-judicial body like the Press Council of India to survive for weeks without its chairperson? Should the largest democracy on Earth put such an example where its government recognized autonomous media watchdog faces an existential crisis as the 15th council of PCI still devoid of a functioning head and 13 seats? How come a press council runs its business without filling these 13 seats, meant for millions of media professionals, for more than a year now, whereas the term of a council is limited to three years only? Many such pertinent questions emerge among media professionals in the south Asian nation, as the regular three-year term (as well as a permissible extended period of six months) of immediate past PCI chairperson Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai came to end on 16 December 2025.

Recently, a good number of media associations urged the Union government in New Delhi to appoint a new chairperson for the PCI as early as possible. Moreover, this writer sent a few official communiqués in the last few weeks, requesting due information about the current PCI team, but the PCI office remained silent. It even did not find time to return a courtesy response. Till recent days, its official website (www.presscouncil.nic.in/ currently non-functional) stated that Justice RP Desai, who took charge on 17 June 2022, continues to be the PCI chairperson. But the media reports suggest that the retired Supreme Court judge has already been appointed as chairperson of the Eighth Pay Commission.

With more to it, the tenure of 14th council expired on 5 October 2024 and various initiatives to constitute the statutory 15th council faced different hurdles. Currently the PCI has functioning members namely Sudhanshu Trivedi, Brij Lal (Rajya Sabha lawmakers), Sambit Patra, Naresh Mhaske and Kali Charan Munda (Lok Sabha members), Ashwini K Mohapatra (University Grants Commission), Manan Kumar Mishra (Bar Council of India), K Sreenivasarao (Sahitya Akademi), Sudhir Kumar Panda, MV Shreyams Kumar, Gurinder Singh, Arun Kumar Tripathi, Braj Mohan Sharma and Arti Tripathi (who either own or carry on the business of management in big/ medium/ small newspapers).

The 28-member PCI (excluding the chair), which was initially set up in 1966 under the Press Council Act 1965 and later re-established in 1979 following the Press Council Act 1978 with an objective to improve the standard of newspapers and news agencies in the billion plus nation, should have 13 individuals representing the professional journalists (out of whom 6 need to be editors and 7 working journalists of newspapers), but those seats remain vacant till date.

The crisis started as many national journo-bodies opposed a change in the PCI rules to pick up members from various press clubs instead of the national union of working journalists. Some of them even approached the court making the situation more complex. They argue that the press clubs are basically recreational bodies and their coverage areas normally stick to a particular region, city or town. Often the press clubs offer memberships to non-working journalists (like academicians, writers, film personalities and also diplomats) to enhance their influences, and hence their members may not do justice to the professional media personnel in various crucial junctures. More precisely the press club/press guild/ media club cannot have an all India body (nonetheless the nomenclature Press Club of India) with representatives from various parts of the vast country. On the other hand, they argued that recognized journalist-unions usually comprise members from different parts of India.

As the PCI becomes headless (happening for the first time in the history of the statutory body), the question must arise: who else are taking care of the robust Indian print media fraternity (comprising over 100,000 publications, endorsed by the Registrar of Newspapers for India, in various frequencies and languages)? The PCI can receive complaints against a particular newspaper/news agency or an editor/working journalist for their professional misconduct deteriorating the standard of journalistic behaviours. But it has limited power to enforce its guidelines by penalizing print outlets as well their editors and working journalists for the violation.

Besides the newspapers, the billion plus nation also supports nearly 400 satellite news channels along with millions of portals, whatsapp and other digital media outlets. But those are not yet under the purview of the PCI. In reality, all modern technology-driven news outlets remain out of its purview. As the PCI enjoys the authority to make observations whenever the conduct of any government is found inappropriate while ensuring freedom of the press. So the demand to bring all the news channels, radio and digital platforms under the PCI's jurisdiction and its subsequent empowerment continues to grow.

Nava Thakuria

Senior journalist based in Guwahati.

BY NAVA THAKURIA

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